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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the organization and content of a two-week workshop designed for teachers of adult illiterates in New York State prisons. It explains why the "backwards" organization of practice to theory, rather than theory to practice, worked. It includes many specific teaching techniques for adult inmates who are becoming literate, including sustained silent reading, retelling, language experience, selective deletion, and prediction. It also evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the workshop.
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Effective Training for Change:

An ABE Workshop

Pat Rigg

When I was first asked to spend two weeks with 15 Adult Basic Education teachers from New York state correctional institutions, training them in individualized instruction and in using a diagnostic-prescriptive approach to reading, I started to plan a fairly "traditional" workshop. I planned to present the theoretical basis for individualizing and for the diagnostic instrument they would be using, then to train them in the use of the diagnostic instrument and in its prescriptive interpretations. Fortunately, I was persuaded not to. A preliminary Workshop with a few members of the educational staff from the prisons indicated quite clearly that any training which was not immediately and clearly applicable in the classrooms would fail. "Don't give us theory; tell us what to do on Monday" was the message which the early Workshop participants presented quite forcefully. And so I revised my entire plans for the two weeks, going in what seemed to me a backwards direction, from practice to theory. Well, they were right; I was wrong. The "backwards" direction worked. I hope this evaluation of what worked and why, and what didn't work and why, can help others involved in ABE-teacher-training.

I first met the ABE-teachers with whom I was to work for two weeks on Monday afternoon. My first mistake was in assuming that the entire Corrections Workshop, which involved others in addition

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to the ABE-teachers, was on schedule. According to the schedule, my teachers had spent Monday morning learning the purpose of the overall Workshop, and what specifically they were to accomplish in the two weeks. In actuality, most of them had spent the morning driving in from as far away as 300 miles, so that when I met them, they were tired, confused about the purpose of the Workshop and therefore frustrated and rather hostile. Consequently, much of our first session was spent in their venting their frustrations and hostility. As anyone who has taught teachers knows, there is no more talkative group anywhere. After over an hour of general griping, I managed to get our group down to business.

The first piece of business was stating specifically what the ABE-teachers were to accomplish by the end of the two weeks, and how I planned to assist them in doing this. They were to 1) devise an ABE module to be used in their classes in their different NY state prisons: 2) plan for immediate individualization of those ABE classes: 3) learn to administer, analyze, and interpret the diagnostic instrument, the Reading Miscue Inventory (Y. Goodman and C. Burke, 1972); 4) prepare specific instructional materials and techniques to be used in their classes as prescriptions suggested by interpretation of the Reading Miscue Inventory (RMI). These goals were not as overwhelming as they seem, because this two-week Workshop was only the first step in their training, with extensive follow-up planned throughout the year.

The second item of business at our first meeting was the presentation of a tape-recording of John M., a 27-year-old man reading, very haltingly and with no help, a story. Each teacher

had a copy of the text being read, with all of John's deviations from that text--his miscues--marked. When they had heard the entire story read, one teacher remarked, "That guy sounds just like my students." This was the touchstone for the entire 2 weeks: whatever was immediately and clearly recognizable as typical of their own classes "worked." Whatever wasn't, didn't. The other teachers agreed with the first speaker: John was a terrible reader, he couldn't get anything out of the story he had read, he should have been given something much easier, preferably at first-grade level. The teachers were unanimous, adamantly so, that John could not have understood anything from the text he had read so stumblingly. Then I played John's unassisted retelling of the story, in which John was asked to relate everything he could remember about what he had read. In his own words, John recounted the story, all events in sequence, all characters clearly distinguished. The ABE-teachers were amazed. Several immediately protested that I had faked the tape and, when I assured them that I had not, they began to explain that John was very unusual, not at all like their own students. "How often," I asked, "do your students read an entire story through with no interruption, no help?" Well, not often; actually, not ever. But, they explained, their students were incapable of getting through a story without help. "How often do you let your students try to get through it alone?" Well, not often; actually not ever. It was at this point that I suggested the first of five basic teaching strategies for improving the reading proficiency of the inmates: let them read. Help the student select a piece of reading material in which he

is interested and then let him alone while he reads it. This is the single most beneficial technique for improving reading proficiency that I know of, but it is probably the most difficult to carry out. The teachers in this Workshop, like most teachers, really care about their students and feel compelled to "help" them read; that is, they feel compelled to read for the student whenever the student hesitates at a word or phrase. This practice trains the students to view reading as an exact process, a process of getting all the words "right" and therefore a process of which they are incapable. Letting the student read without interference, on the other hand, trains him to view reading as a process of which he is capable, a process by which his knowledge of language and of the world enable him to get meaning from print without bogging himself down in frustrating attempts to be exact.

The notion that reading is an exact process is a common one. Many of these teachers, like others, assumed that their own, proficient, reading was a process of recognizing every word on the page, either through phonic decoding or through memorization of sight vocabulary. They believed that when they read, they did not omit, substitute, insert, or reverse words. The knew that their students, beginning readers all, did do these things, and the teachers assumed that these omissions, substitutions, and so forth were clear indications of their students' lack of reading ability. To read right is to read exactly what's on the page, the teachers thought. Part of my job for the next two weeks, and the most difficult part, was to change the teachers' definition of reading. I wanted them to recognize that reading is not an exact process, and that the best readers omit, substitute, insert, and

reverse words. I wanted to convince them that the purpose of reading is to get meaning from print, and that meaning is in the head of the reader, not in the print itself. The reader must be encouraged to guess and must be discouraged from relying so heavily on graphic information that he develops what Frank Smith calls "tunnel vision" and loses all meaning in his attempt to get one or two words sounded out "right." I could not begin to talk about any of this then, because this was theory, and I was committed to presenting practice first, theory second. It was very clear to me on that first day, though, that unless I could change the theory of reading the ABE-teachers had, I could not really expect to change their practices. What we think reading is determines how we teach it.

Our group spent the next morning working with the Reading Miscue Inventory. That afternoon, thirteen inmates from an ABE class in the closest NY state prison were bussed in. The same thirteen came for the next six afternoons. The inmates gave the Workshop its greatest strength: any material or technique which I suggested could be tested by the ABE-teachers that very day with the inmates. There was no pretense that our afternoon class of inmates was typical of inmate classes as far as their behavior went. These men had been carefully selected by their prison officials as being exceptionally well-behaved and trustworthy. However, even though their behavior was not typical of prison ABE-classes, their reading abilities were. Most of them considered themselves to be non-readers, and most of the Workshop participants agreed with this self-evaluation at first.

At our first meeting with the inmates, I explained that we needed their help, that they were giving the teachers a chance to practice new techniques which, I hoped, would help the ABE classes in all the state prisons. I had covered three tables with a variety of reading materials before the inmates arrived: these materials ranged from wordless picture books like Mayer's Frog, Where Are You? to motorcycle magazines. I asked the inmates to look over the materials, select something, and read for thirty minutes. That afternoon and all succeeding afternoons, as soon as the inmates arrived, they selected something to read, and all of us--inmates and teachers alike--spent half an hour in sustained silent reading. Some of the inmates spent that time looking at pictures and advertisements in the motorbike and hot rod magazines; others reread materials prepared with them the previous afternoon; two or three read complete stories from series like Macmillan's Gateway, Allyn and Bacon's Breakthrough, Phoenix, or Globe. The sustained silent reading period was thus a live demonstration of the first technique I advised--let them read.

The first afternoon with the inmates we followed the sustained silent reading with a demonstration of a language experience story. I confess I had not expected this demonstration to be successful because I knew so little about the inmates. Could any of them read anything already? Would they loosen up enough to dictate a group language experience story? Was the topic I had chosen, their bus ride to Albany that afternoon, too dull? I was surprised as well as pleased when four or five inmates offered sentences about their trip. I wrote these on the overhead,

rereading each one once or twice aloud and asking if I had gotten it right. After this, each teacher selected an inmate and the pairs worked together, expanding the story we had begun as a large group. Each teacher, acting as a tutor, wrote down whatever changes on the original and expansions the inmate dictated. One of the teachers later expressed what several teachers felt they learned from their first experience using this technique: "It's a miracle! I could have sworn this guy couldn't read one word, and bam! he just reads the whole story back to me. I can't believe it! He can read." This discovery was probably the most important one the teachers made in the entire two weeks: they discovered the inmates could read. Before the Workshop, many of the ABE-teachers had been spending a great deal of time and energy teaching phonics rules and sight word recognition, and had been understandably frustrated when their students still could not read. Some of the teachers had concluded that their students were incapable of ever learning to read. It is not difficult to guess how this attitude affected their students' self-image and performance. Most of the ABE-teachers had never tried or even heard of the language experience technique; this one experience with its "miraculous" results convinced most of them of its applicability to their own classrooms. If "non-readers" could read their own ideas expressed in their own language, clearly then this was the place to start.

The teachers who were tutoring those inmates who were just beginning to read continued using the language experience technique each afternoon, with the inmate rereading the stories he had dictated previously and dictating a new one each afternoon.

Here is a sample:

> One time two policemen threatened to beat me and my brother up for attempted robbery of a liquor store. My brother told me there was a starter's pistol in my father's dresser. Some how he got me to go in with the gun while my other two brothers waited outside. I ended up running out when I saw the man stick his hand under the counter and then go into the back. That made me think he pressed the alarm and went to get his gun. When I got home the police asked where the gun was. We said we threw it in the creek. The police said, "You're a damn liar. You didn't even have a chance to go to the creek." My brother finally told the police where the gun came from. Then my mother cried and she said, "What are you going to do next, go out and kill somebody?" Then the polic put me and my brother in a detention home and threw my older brother in jail. The jail was like a zoo. The people behaved like animals. I don't blame them after being treated like them. That's jail for you.

The third day of the Workshop we spent the morning selecting and preparing materials to use in the administration of the Reading Miscue Inventory, and learning how to guide the retelling. That afternoon, four teachers administered the Reading Miscue Inventory to the inmates they were tutoring while the rest continued their sustained silent reading. That afternoon the teachers all practiced guiding a retelling; that is, a recall and discussion of what the student has just read. A retelling offers the teacher an informal evaluation of his student's comprehension; it offers the student practice in organizing the information he has just read so as to present that information to someone else. Quite often, a student will not realize just how much he does understand and remember until he begins to relate it to someone else. Prompting is limited to questions like "Then what happened? What else happened? What was he like? Why did he do that?" After one or two retelling sessions, the student understands that his

task in reading is not to sound out every word correctly, but to comprehend meaning. His job is to find out what sort of people the main characters in the story are and what the major events of the plot are. With this sort of advance organizer, the student begins to read for meaning rather than for exactness, and his comprehension soars.

After the first two techniques--let them read; let them tell somebody what they read--had been demonstrated and practiced by the ABE-teachers, I presented a third. This was selective deletion, a variation of the cloze procedure. I displayed the following paragraph developed by Carol Burke on the overhead and asked one of the teachers to read it aloud:

> Blast off! The three spacemen settled back in their seats as the rocket left the _____. They did not worry because they knew they had plenty of _____ to eat, _____to drink, and _____ to breathe.

I had expected the teacher reading aloud to substitute some meaningful word or phrase in the blanks, but he did not. This is what he said:

> Blast off! The three spacemen settled back in their seats as the rocket left the they did not worry because they knew they had plenty of to eat, to drink and to breathe.

I suggested that someone else read the paragraph aloud, since the first reading, I said, "wasn't very good." Another teacher volunteered, but he also omitted the blanks. I asked for still a third attempt, and another teacher tried. He too did not try to fill in the blanks. All three were reading exactly

what was there, and all three were producing nonsense. All this time the inmates had been listening to the teachers read the paragraph and had been looking at the paragraph on the screen. As the third teacher read aloud, I could hear several of the inmates whispering, reading along with him, except that the inmates were filling in the blanks. So I asked one to "help the teachers out and show them how to read it right." This inmate, a "non-reader," read it aloud. Here's what he said:

> Blast off! The three spacemen settled back in their seats as the rocket left the launchpad. They did not worry because they knew they had plenty of food to eat, a lot of Tang to drink, and enough oxygen to breathe.

The advantages of the selective deletion technique are that it forces the reader to predict and it forces him to use context to formulate his prediction and to confirm that prediction. We later used the technique on one of the inmate's language experience stories. His tutor wrote the story on the overhead; the tutor and inmate together read it aloud to the group; and then I deleted a few words from his story and asked for volunteers to read the story again, filling in the blanks with guesses. Most of the inmates seemed to enjoy this guessing game very much, and their tutors incorporated the technique into their next tutoring session.

A fifth technique which worked well with the students was the open-ended story. I presented the students with the first part of a story, and asked them what sort of people the two major characters were, and what the students thought would happen next. Each interpretation of character and each prediction of plot were defended by referring back to the story, which was displayed on an overhead throughout the discussion. To use this technique

with a group, the teacher encourages each student to express an opinion, and often a very heated debate takes place. Throughout the discussion, the students continually refer to the text, saying things like, "Look where it says _____." The story is thus read and reread constantly, so that finally even the least proficient reader is able to read it independently. This technique also demonstrates to the students that there is no single, correct meaning to a story, since different interpretations are not only possible, but are prized. Some of the endings to the story which the inmates predicted were written down and served those beginning readers as more language experience material.

Thanks to the inmates, the demonstrations of these five techniques of teaching beginning reading to adults were successful. The ABE-teachers were able to see for themselves the effectiveness of sustained silent reading, retelling, language experience selective deletion, and prediction. Hearing about these techniques without seeing them actually work would have been much less successful; and seeing them without participating in them would also have been less successful. What the ABE-teachers heard about, saw, and did themselves they learned. What they only heard about and watched they did not learn nearly as well, as I found out when I asked them to do something I had told them how to do, but had not demonstrated and had not given them enough guided practice in.

In addition to learning a few new reading instruction techniques, the workshop participants were to learn to administer and interpret the Reading Miscue Inventory, and they were to learn to individualize their classes. Neither of these goals

was successfully met. Each teacher administered, scored, and interpreted at least one Reading Miscue Inventory, but no teacher had sufficient guided practice to become proficient at using the RMI. The RMI requires a student to read an unfamiliar, difficult passage, such as a short story, in its entirety with no interruption or assistance. After he completes the reading, the student is asked to relate as much as he can remember of the story, and the interviewer's questions may not refer to any information not already volunteered by the student. All of this is tape-recorded. An exact copy of the text which the student read is prepared and on this copy the teacher marks all the student's deviations from the text. These deviations, such as omissions, substitutions, insertions, and reversals, are miscues, a term coined by K.S. Goodman to indicate that deviations from the text are cued by the interaction of the grapho-phonic,grammatical, and semantic systems of the reader with the text. The Reading Miscue Inventory asks nine questions about each of the first twenty-five miscues:

1. Is the miscue caused by a difference between the dialects of the author and the reader?
2. Does the miscue involve a shift in intonation?
3. If the miscue is a substitution, how similar are the spellings?
4. If the miscue is a substitution, how similar are the sounds?
5. If the miscue is a substitution, are the grammatical functions of the two items, text's and reader's, the same?
6. Does the reader regress and correct the miscue?
7. Does the miscue result in a structure that sounds like English?

8. Does the miscue result in a structure that makes sense?

9. Does the miscue change the meaning of the story?

The answers to these questions result in a reader's profile: a numerical indication of how well he is using the three subsystems of language to get meaning from print. The retelling is also scored numerically. Interpretations of the various percentages on the RMI profile enable the teacher to see just where a reader's strengths lie, and to diagnose which areas need to become stronger. On the basis of this diagnosis, the RMI prescribes specific strategy lessons for increasing the strength of weak areas.

Obviously, the administration and scoring of the RMI require time and thought; the RMI is not a handy-dandy checklist of performance criteria which lets the teacher know, within fifteen minutes, what his student's reading level is. Trying to use the RMI once was not enough for the ABE-teachers to become good at using it, but it was enough for many of them to begin changing the way they listened to students read. Before, all the teachers had viewed any deviation from the text as an error; with the RMI questions guiding them, they had to consider the quality, rather than the number; of deviations from the text. For example, a student who reads "ponies" for "horses" in the sentence "After they arrived at the ranch, they saddled three horses" has made a high quality miscue: the student who substitutes "houses" for "horses" in the same sentence has made a low quality miscue. Most of the ABE-teachers found themselves for the first time listening for what a student did right, rather than concentrating exclusively on what the student did wrong.

Another advantage of the RMI as a training tool was that it forced many of the ABE-teachers to reconsider the appropriateness of choosing reading materials strictly on the basis of their advertised readability level. Readability formulas measure the difficulty of the surface structure of a text, but do not indicate the difficulty of the deep structure, nor the concept density. Many of the stories in books for ABE have neither plot nor character development. Many require an experiental background the students just do not have. Let me give just two examples: one ABE-teacher chose a three-page story, graded level two, for the inmate he was working with. The title was "The Man Who Wouldn't Die,"; it was about Rasputin. The inmate had never heard of Imperial Russia; and his lack of understanding was shown in his retelling: "Somebody tried to kill this guy. I can't remember his name. I don't know, maybe it was in Georgia. The prisons down there are really bad." Another ABE-teacher chose a level one story, a mishmash of unrelated facts about an airplane pilot in Alaska. His student's retelling: "This guy flies around and helps people."

In order to administer an RMI, the teachers had to develop a guide for scoring the retelling, with different points assigned to recall of characters, plot events, theme, and so forth. It took only this one experience with the RMI for many of them to recognize that it would be better to ask students to read stories which were relevant to their backgrounds and had enough plot and character development to be interesting to the reader, than to select stories solely on the basis of the readability levels.

The ABE-teachers did not fully meet the goal of learning to individualize their classes. They listened with apparent interest to two lectures on how to do it, and they watched the inmates participating in individualized sessions, but when I asked them to plan the next day's individualized session with the inmates, they could not. They were able to draft a floor plan for the spatial arrangements necessary to an individualized class, but were unable to suggest how to arrange the time. Although they watched a demonstration of the students' taking their own folders, reading their assignments, and following those different assignments, none of the teachers in their plans even mentioned the use of student folders. They watched an expert at individualization work with the inmates, constantly moving from group to group and from individual to individual. But when they attempted to demonstrate with the inmates, one teacher spent 35 minutes working with one student; the teacher who was acting as his aide sat with a group of five for 45 minutes: and during all this time seven inmates were receiving neither assignments nor attention. In a real classroom situation, and even more so in a prison classroom, this would result in chaos.

My final evaluation of the Workshop was that it was partially successful. The ABE-teachers completed their module and they showed themselves competent in using the new techniques for teaching reading. Follow-up visits to many of their classrooms in the prisons have confirmed that the ABE-teachers have increased their understanding of the reading process; they have become better at estimating their students' strengths in reading, and at using personalized, individualized instruction to increase those strengths. Of the

ten teachers visited so far, eight are applying for Workshop ideas, and both they and their students view the changes as improvements. Two have made no changes: one is a math teacher who was sent to the Workshop through a fluke; the other made it clear throughout his two weeks here that he had nothing to learn. For most of them, then, I was successful in changing this theory of reading, and this change is showing up in their classroom practices. I was not successful in training the ABE-teachers to use the Reading Miscue Inventory. To become proficient in using the RMI, one needs to administer, score, and evaluate three or four RMI's within a month following the training. Since none of the ABE-teachers have had access to tape-recorders at their institutions, two months have passed without their being able to administer even one RMI, much less get any feedback from me on their RMI procedures.

If I taught a Workshop for ABE-teachers again, I would want some changes. First, I would give the Workshop participants more accurate information about the Workshop's goals before they arrived. Second, I would try to get more accurate information myself, because I spent a great deal of time readjusting each day's activities to conform to new demands. One of these was time. My initial planning for the two weeks assumed that we would have more time than we actually had. My original information was that I could count on two full weeks, 8:00 to 5:00, plus evening and weekend assignments. However, the actual Workshop time was first cut to 9:00 to 4:00; then Friday afternoons were removed; then Monday mornings were removed; then two other afternoons were taken from the Workshop so the teachers could attend other meetings. Any assignments over the weekend were simply not done. The result was that I had planned for 80 hours, and I had only 50.

Third, I would want much more information about the teachers' classes before I set up another Workshop. One of the minor problems I faced was adjusting the ABE Workshop content so that it applied to the two GED teachers who showed up. I would want more reliable information about what demands would be made on the teachers as a result of their attending the Workshop. I had understood that each was expected to administer an RMI to each ABE student in his class; this was obviously impossible for the teachers who were responsible for up to 200 students. Another area in which I was operating on faulty assumptions was the area of teacher-supervisor communication. I had assumed that the teachers and supervisors had received the same information as to the purposes of the Workshop, and that they had ample opportunity for discussion of how to implement the changes proposed by the Workshop. In fact, the teachers and supervisors seemed to speak to each other very seldom, even during the Workshop period, when they were all housed in the same dorm.

Lack of time and lack of information were, then, the two major reasons the ABE Workshop was not fully successful. Whatever success the Workshop had was due to three causes: clear relevance, follow-up, and support services. The primary cause of success is its obvious immediate relevance to the participants' classes. Working backwards from practice to theory was successful: once a technique had been demonstrated to work well, it was easy to give the reason it worked, the theoretical base. Having typical students to work with was immensely beneficial, since any method I proposed could immediately be tried out. If I did another Workshop, I would increase the time spent with the students, from two hours

a day for seven days, to three hours a day for ten days. With this additional time, I think the teachers could get the practice in individualizing classes they so needed.

The follow-up, visits to the teachers' own classes, is the second major reason the Workshop worked as well as it did. It is easy to get excited by new ideas at a Workshop, but even easier, when back home, to become pressured by all the usual demands into postponing the implementation of those ideas. Soon the postponement has stretched on for a couple of months, and the new ideas have blurred. Eventually the ideas presented in the Workshop are relegated to "something I heard about once, but it was so much trouble, I never got around to it." If the teachers know that they are going to be observed soon in their classes, if they know that someone is checking on whether they are trying to implement the ideas, and that the person is available to help them implement those ideas, they are much more likely to begin change.

The third reason for whatever success the Workshop had was the support services. If the teachers or i needed something, someone got it for us. We needed tape recorders, tapes, and Xeroxed copies of scripts to administer the RMI's; someone got them for us. We needed the language experience stories, dictated to a teacher, typed by the next day; we had them. I wanted to establish a very relaxed atmosphere for the inmates, but I had to meet security regulations by not allowing them out of the room, so the support services brought coffee and cakes to our classroom. If an inmate didn't like coffee, someone went out and brought him milk. These are tiny details, but their cumulative effect was enormously helpful in building and maintaining a smoothly running, relaxed and

friendly, but business-like atmosphere. I have led Workshops where I spent a great deal of time running off dittos, scrounging faulty tape-recorders, buying tapes out of my pocket, even pasting paper on the wall because someone forgot to get a blackboard or acetate for the overhead. The support services of this Workshop were excellent; they gave me and the teachers whatever we needed to get our job done.

Would I do it again? Absolutely. I would want more time and more information; I would want the teachers to have more time with the students; but I would not go back to presenting theory first, applications later. Going "backwards" from practice to theory was, as it turned out, going forwards.

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ABSTRACT

Effective Training for Change, an ABE Workshop

Presents the organization and content of a two-week workshop designed for teachers of adult illiterates in New York State prisons. Explains why the "backwards" organization of practice to theory, rather than theory to practice, worked. Includes many specific teaching techniques for adult inmates who are becoming literate.